

Chapter 7

Increase the Quality and Years of Healthy Life for Seniors

Sunflower

As the state's population ages, all South Carolinians have an important part to play to help older adults remain healthy, functionally independent, and living in the community. The gain of 30 years – to 77 – of life expectancy in the United States during the 20th century was a triumph for public health. The success of public health initiatives in areas such as infectious disease control, immunizations and chronic disease prevention has resulted in longer, healthier lives for many Americans. A new challenge for public health is to focus on healthy aging to assure that older adults maintain optimal health status and quality of life in later years.

Preventive health key to healthy senior population

Poor health is not an inevitable consequence of aging. By taking preventive steps, more South Carolinians in their 70s, 80s and 90s enjoy independent, active living with minimal health problems. Many older adults, however, still suffer unnecessarily from chronic and infectious diseases, injuries and functional limitations that are avoidable or can be delayed. Scientifically proven measures such as increased physical activity can improve health, reduce the impact of disease, and delay disability and the need for long-term care. Public health professionals and citizens alike should continue promoting and adopting preventive steps so that more South Carolinians can enjoy healthy aging.

Senior population growing

By 2015, South Carolina's mature adult population is expected to make up one-third of the state's residents. Mature adults outpaced other age groups with a 33 percent growth rate between 1990 and 2000. In 2000, South Carolina boasted 485,300 residents 65 and older. The mature adult population has increased by approximately 100,000 each decade from 1950 to 1990 and by 90,900 from 1990 to 2000, representing an overall increase of 322 percent. An astonishing growth in the numbers of South Carolina residents over 85 parallels the national trend. In 1950, their numbers totaled 4,193. By 2000, there were 50,269, or 12 times the number in 1950. By the year 2025, estimates are that the number of people over 85 will reach 98,609, representing a 96 percent increase from 2000.

Poor health among seniors costly

Preventive steps are important measures because the growing population of older adults places increased demands on the health care system. Seniors are the most frequent users of



health care services in our state. Growth in the population of seniors needing long-term care and health care, the diminishing capacity of family members to provide long-term care, changes in medical technology, and rising health care costs have resulted in increasing obligations for federal and state governments as well as for families.

The cost of health care in institutions can be staggering. One year in a nursing home can cost from \$35,000 to \$45,000. Medicaid bears the major portion of these expenses. With the state's economy, future reimbursement costs for nursing homes will be a challenge. Scientifically proven measures such as increased physical activity can improve health, reduce the impact of disease, and delay disability and the need for long-term care.

Arthritis: a burden for seniors

Arthritis and other rheumatic conditions remain among the most common chronic conditions and the leading cause of disability in the United States. Twenty-eight percent of South Carolina adults have doctor-diagnosed arthritis. While arthritis is not limited to seniors, the prevalence increases with age. Nearly 60 percent of South Carolina adults with arthritis are 65 or older.

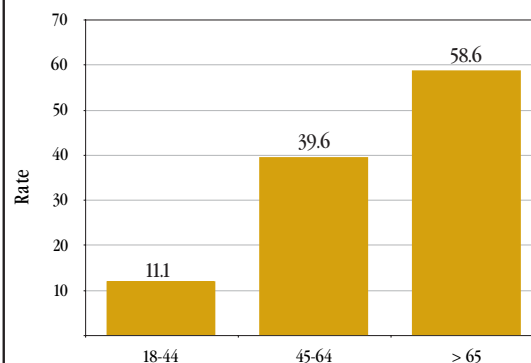
Some forms of arthritis can be prevented. For example, weight control and injury prevention lower the risk for developing osteoarthritis. Physical activity can lower the risk of getting arthritis as well as improve the quality of life for those who have arthritis.

For any form of arthritis, early diagnosis and appropriate management can reduce symptoms, lessen disability, and improve quality of life.

► <http://www.scdhec.gov/arthritis/>

► S.C. Arthritis Prevention and Control Program
(803) 898-0760

**Prevalence of Arthritis in S.C. by Age,
2002 BRFS**



Data Source: SC DHEC BRFS



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Prevent and decrease overweight and obesity

Eating and drinking too many calories and not getting enough exercise can cause excess weight and obesity. Unhealthy eating habits such as high-fat diets and low intake of fruits and vegetables, along with sedentary lifestyles, account for about 300,000 deaths each year in the United States. Obesity and being overweight are associated with an increased risk for coronary heart disease, type 2 diabetes, stroke, gallbladder disease, osteoarthritis, sleep apnea, breathing problems, and certain cancers (see page 14).

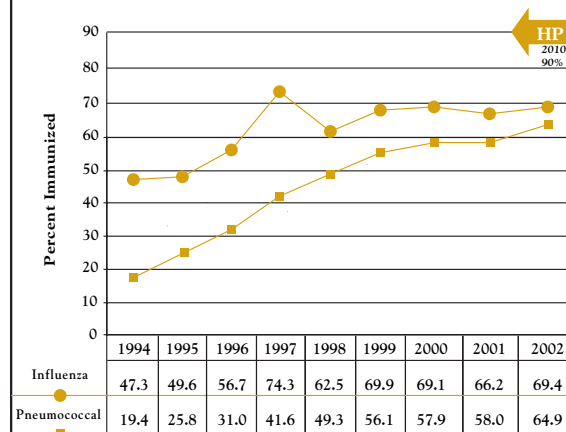


Influenza (the flu) and pneumonia take toll on seniors

Influenza (the flu) and pneumonia combined are the eighth leading cause of death in South Carolina, claiming 792 residents age 65 and older in 2002. Nationally, about 20,000 deaths a year are attributed to flu. Ninety percent of deaths from the flu occur among people ages 65 and older. Medicare costs for influenza-related hospitalizations in the United States can reach \$1 billion each year. A one-time dose of pneumonia vaccine and annual flu shots are the primary methods for preventing these diseases and their severe complications. (For coverage levels by race, see page 12. For U.S. comparison, see page 64.)

➔ <http://www.scdhec.gov/hs/diseasecont/immunization>

Persons Ages 65+ Who Received an Influenza Vaccine in the Past Year or a Pneumonia Vaccine Ever



Data Source: SC DHEC BRFSS

Cardiovascular disease, diabetes can be prevented

Cardiovascular disease and diabetes are serious chronic diseases in South Carolina (see heart disease and stroke data on pages 9, 55 and 56). Both are more prevalent among older South Carolinians and among African-Americans. Both can be prevented or delayed by following simple guidelines, but translating these guidelines into action and behavioral changes has proven to be very complex. For example, just a small weight loss of 7 percent can prevent or delay diabetes in persons at highest risk for the disease.

► http://www.scdhec.gov/HS/comhlth/cvh/cvh_program.htm

Breast cancer high among seniors

Among South Carolina seniors, the breast cancer death rate for women age 65 and older is nearly 7.8 times (780 percent) higher than the rate for women under the age of 65 (see data, page 54). The death rate for African-American women age 65 and older in the state is substantially higher than for white women of the same age. Early detection is the best prevention, and this includes the clinical breast exam, mammogram and the self-breast exam. Stopping smoking, a good diet high in fiber, low in fat, and including many vegetables, and also regular exercise are helpful in preventing breast cancer. Control of obesity is also recommended because cancer is harder to detect in dense or fat tissues.

► <http://www.scdhec.gov/HS/comhlth/Cancer/links.htm>



Involving senior citizens in environmental stewardship

Seniors over the age of 50 can become involved in a variety of environmental improvement projects aimed at educating citizens and taking positive steps to improve environmental quality through the Senior Environmental Corps. DHEC and the Upper Savannah Council of Governments formed the corps for the Upper Savannah region of South Carolina in consultation with the Environmental Alliance for Senior Involvement. An additional partner is the Lander University students' environmental studies organization. For more information, contact Robert Jackson at the DHEC Upper Savannah EQC District Office at (864) 223-0333 or Blake Lanford at the Upper Savannah Council of Governments at (864) 941-8075.



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Ongoing challenges, new approaches

Healthy communities lead to healthy aging

Communities can assist in healthy aging by making environments safe, more activity-based, and accessible to seniors. Planning should include creating communities with bike paths, sidewalks and neighborhood grocery stores. Safer communities and mass transportation are central issues for our aging population because they provide basic access to services that younger South Carolinians take for granted. (For more on healthy communities, see page 2.)



Communities can assist their aging population by assuring that supports and services are available to promote healthy behaviors and health improvements. Senior citizens should be involved in any efforts to conduct community planning that promotes increasing activity levels and independence for older residents. Social supports, such as volunteer opportunities, also provide a way for seniors to contribute to their communities while others gain from their knowledge and experience. Successful initiatives could focus on enabling senior residents to age in place while maintaining the quality and years of their lives.

Safe, senior-focused housing is needed and can be encouraged by working with developers to assure larger door openings allowing wheelchair accessibility in homes and showers. Adaptations are easily made for door handles, and ramps allow quick movement in the event of a fire or health emergency.

Personal responsibility for health necessary

To make a difference in quality of life now and in later years, it is important to take personal responsibility for health:

- Know where to seek and receive support services. Families provide 80 percent of all long-term care services. Volunteer your time and talents to support these family caregivers.
- Help seniors manage their medical needs and medicines. Conduct a safety audit in their homes to assure no hidden dangers could cause injuries. Provide transportation to seniors. Volunteer for community services aimed at seniors, such as Meals on Wheels.

- If you are a senior, seek medical screenings for chronic diseases—get your blood pressure checked and get screened for diabetes. If you are a woman, learn to do breast self-exams and get a regular Pap smear. Men over 50 need annual prostate exams and blood tests.
- Stay physically and mentally active. Physical activity and nutrition are our most important allies in the fight against chronic disease.
- Get a flu shot every year in October.
- Ask your doctor or public health nurse about your need for a pneumonia shot.

Institutional alternatives are desired

DHEC's **Health Regulations** section monitors the health and safety at adult day cares, nursing homes and community residential care facilities.

More than 40 nursing homes in South Carolina are implementing the **Eden Alternative** or other quality initiatives with similar values and principles. Many facilities that have implemented the Eden model have had decreased staff turnover rates, decreased use of medication, and decreased infection rates.

As South Carolina's aging population continues to increase and consequently the need for long-term care services increases, innovative models of care to help keep seniors in their homes and communities are needed. One such model is **PACE (Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly)**. PACE takes many familiar elements of the traditional health care system and reorganizes them in a way that makes sense to families, health care providers and the government programs and others that pay for care.

Additional resources

S.C. Department of Health and Human Services
Bureau of Senior Services

▶ (803) 898-2850

▶ <http://www.dhhs.state.sc.us/InsideDHHS/Bureaus/BureauofSeniorServices/default.htm>

Eden Alternative

▶ <http://www.edenalt.com>

The National Council on Aging

▶ <http://www.ncoa.org>

AARP

▶ <http://www.aarp.org>

